

Inside the Mind of a Child Summer 2005

The Jewish News

We all have occasional off days. When children become emotionally withdrawn, some softly spoken words can get them back to their best.

We're all mind readers. Every hour of every day, people of all ages busily second-guess the thoughts and motivations of those around them. Adults are more aware of mind-reading and can stop themselves doing it, while for younger people the dividing line between what they imagine to be the truth and reality can often be impossible to detect.

Lots of children mind read, mainly about what others think of them and the reason behind their peers' actions. For example, a child told me that she and three of her friends had met up after shul one Saturday. They were chatting when her friends went off to play outside and left her alone. She interpreted this as "they did not want to play with her".

I asked her why she thought they had done this and if it had been intentional. She didn't know and thought that perhaps she had said something wrong, insulted one of the girls or was just boring as she had been very quiet during lunch. Did she know they did not want her to join in? No. And how was she going to respond?

- Ask why they did not invite her to play
- Shout at them
- Ignore them
- Make new friends

She decided to ask a girl in her circle of friends who she trusted most if there was any reason for them leaving her behind. Her response was: "No, we expected you to follow us into the garden and when you did not appear we carried on without you". All that energy and upset for nothing. Next time she would go and find her friends and join in their fun without giving it a second thought.

Mind reading is a waste of time and can be dangerous for our self-esteem. If we have low self-esteem it can damage it even more. Children can doubt who they are and imagine that they have done something wrong, when instead they have created an imaginary situation. Distance can be created between them and their peers because of the thoughts they have created that may not be true.

So, how do we teach our children not to do this? When they come home complaining that life is tough on them, give them a reality check. Was there any situation leading up to them being treated in a certain way or not being included?

Perhaps their friends were not feeling great that day, were in a bad mood or were thinking about something else when they acted in that way, or had problems at home? We all have the right to have off days. Finally, ask your child what you are thinking at the moment and see if they guess right. If they can't read your mind, how can they read other peoples?